

THE STUDY OF MAN

JEWISH-GENTILE INTERMARRIAGE: FACTS AND TRENDS

A Sociologist Summarizes Recent Studies

HERSHEL SHANKS

AMERICAN Jews have always been keenly interested in their rate of intermarriage, perhaps precisely because it has been such a difficult statistic to come by—coupled with the fact that it is the common assumption that a high rate of intermarriage spells the end of Judaism, and with it the heritage and way of life that Judaism represents.

This writer believes that the American Jewish intermarriage rate can now be reliably estimated at between 5 and 10 per cent. That is, for every 100 married couples in which either one or both parties are Jews, between 5 and 10 couples are intermarriages. (This figure is, of course, higher than the proportion of the *individual* intermarried Jews in the total number of spouses. That proportion would be between 2.6 and 5.6 per cent.)

SINCE "religion" is recorded neither on marriage licenses nor in the federal census, and consequently we cannot simply count the num-

ber of intermarriages in the country, more than usual interest must be given to the way in which this estimate has been arrived at.

The only direct evidence we have had in recent years on intermarriage in this country has come from individual community surveys. However, it is difficult to get information on intermarried people even in this way. It may be, for example, that the persons most likely to intermarry would also most likely be "missed" in a survey of the Jewish population of a community. It is, nevertheless, from these scattered and obscure, published and unpublished studies that we get our first notion of the American Jewish intermarriage rate.

The table below is a sampling of over half of the available community studies, selected because they seem superior from the point of view of survey methodology, and because they give a representative regional cross-section.*

Intermarriage rate (per cent of intermarriages of all marriages involving Jews)

Des Moines, Iowa	1949	8
Indianapolis, Ind.	1941	12†
New Haven, Conn.	1950	8
New London, Conn.	1938	5
Stamford, Conn.	1938	7
Trenton, N. J.	1937	1

Allowing for the intermarried couples who

*These studies represent the work of the following sociologists in the order of presentation: John E. Mayer, Clyde V. Kiser and Paul K. Whelpton, Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, Bessie Bloom Wessel, Samuel Koenig, and Sophia M. Robison.

†There are good reasons to think this is probably an overestimate. In this study, the wife had to be forty-four years of age or younger; and both partners had to be *native* whites.

A RECENT study by the author as well as a collation of obscure and sometimes unpublished material enables HERSHEL SHANKS to establish what is perhaps the most reliable estimate that has yet been published of Jewish intermarriage in America. He also discusses the attitude of Jewish youth toward intermarriage and the problems it poses to them, as well as the puzzle which the American Jewish intermarriage rate presents to the sociologist. Mr. Shanks, a native of Sharon, Pennsylvania, holds degrees from Haverford College and Columbia University; and is now a student at Harvard Law School. His unpublished researches on intermarriage are in both the Haverford and Columbia libraries. This is his first article for COMMENTARY.

were "missed," these studies would indicate an intermarriage rate of approximately 10 per cent in these cities. But are we justified in making a generalization about American Jews when we have studied only the behavior of Jews in a few scattered American cities?

This is not simply an academic question. To illustrate, we might look at the intermarriage rate of Catholics in this country which was reported in a study of New Haven (August B. Hollingshead, "Cultural Factors in the Selection of Marriage Mates," *American Sociological Review*, October 1950), one of the cities for which we have Jewish rates.

The rate of Catholic mixed marriage may be estimated from the marriage records which each Catholic diocese keeps. The national rate, as taken from these records, is reliably reported as at least 30 per cent (John L. Thomas, "The Factor of Religion in the Selection of Marriage Mates," *American Sociological Review*, August 1951). This is a minimum figure because it includes only those marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics which are performed by a priest. The number of Catholic intermarriages performed by members of other clergy as well as by civil officials would undoubtedly increase this figure. Yet the New Haven study reports a Catholic intermarriage rate of only 12 per cent for New Haven. By way of contrast with the New Haven figures, we might cite a Catholic mixed marriage rate of 40 per cent for the entire state of Connecticut, 9 per cent in the El Paso diocese, and 70 per cent for the Savannah-Atlanta diocese. To what extent do similar variations occur between different areas in Jewish intermarriage?

THE figures we have come from several smaller communities in different areas of the country, and because the estimates of the intermarriage rate in these communities do not vary greatly, we have some assurance that these studies adequately represent the comparatively smaller communities. But, according to the latest estimates of Jewish population (*American Jewish Yearbook*, 1948) over 70 per cent of American Jews live in cities of 500,000 or more. Fully half are in three cities: New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago. What is the rate of Jewish intermarriage in the larger cities?

The only indication we have had so far on this point is an old study made by Julius Drachsler, who examined over 100,000 marriage certificates in New York City ranging

over a five-year period from 1908 to 1912 (*Democracy and Assimilation*, New York, 1920). Since there is no indication of religion on these records, Drachsler attempted to detect intermarriages by four criteria: the names of the spouses, the names of the witnesses, the names of the officiating officers, and the country of birth of the spouses and their parents. By this method, Drachsler found a Jewish-Gentile intermarriage rate for New York City of 1.17 per cent. But this has little meaning for us today, not only because of his doubtful methodology (we have no idea how many intermarriages escaped his critical eye), but also because the social situation has so radically changed in over forty years. Forty years ago most of Drachsler's subjects were foreign-born, or were the sons and daughters of parents who emigrated to this country in middle age. Assimilation (or acculturation) had not proceeded to the degree it has today.

We may ask if the intermarriage rates of European cities or the intermarriage rates for Canadian Jews, both of which are reliably known, can give us any information as to whether or not we may find a higher intermarriage rate in the large metropolitan areas of this country than in the smaller cities. Here we are presented with conflicting viewpoints. Arthur Ruppin (*The Jewish Fate and Future*, Macmillan, 1940) asserts on the basis of a study of intermarriage rates for several large cities in Europe: "Mixed marriages are most common in the large town where the influence of religion and of difference in social status is least, and where social intercourse between Jews and non-Jews is easiest." In *Canada's Jews* (Canadian Jewish Congress, 1939), on the other hand, Louis Rosenberg reports: "The larger the Jewish population and the greater the percentage of Jews to the total population, the smaller the rate of intermarriage."

One can argue indefinitely whether America follows the European pattern, where there was more intermarriage in the big cities than in the small, or the Canadian, where the situation is reversed. Those who believe the intermarriage rate is higher in the metropolitan areas point to the anonymity of the city into which an intermarried couple may escape without suffering the burden of community disapproval. As further evidence, they point to the fact that the proportion of synagogue membership is lower in the metropolitan areas, a factor which undoubtedly contributes to or reflects condi-

tions that contribute to increased intermarriage. The secular culture of the city, the lack of internal, individual compulsion to abide by community standards, the haziness of these standards, are all cited as support for the argument that intermarriage is running rampant among the big Jewish settlements in our large cities.

But, equally convincing arguments can be used to support the opposite proposition. After all, it is in the metropolitan areas that Jews tend to cluster solidly in one neighborhood. Where there are so many more Jews, it is easier for a Jew to find a Jewish mate. Etc., etc.

IT is financially out of the question to ascertain directly the actual proportion of intermarriages in a large city whose population runs into the millions, as we have done for smaller cities. To draw a small representative sample, as is done in public opinion work, is also a rather expensive undertaking. There are additional objections to measuring such a personal matter through the use of short, un-intensive, public opinion interviews.

One way of handling the problem is to find an indirect indicator of the phenomenon under question, one which can be measured. Though it would be difficult to find an indicator from which we could make an actual estimate of the rate of intermarriage in large metropolitan areas, it is possible to find indicators by which we can *compare* the intermarriage rate of metropolitan areas with the rate in smaller cities, the latter rate being, as I have said, fairly accurately known.

In a study recently completed by the writer at Columbia University, two such indicators were chosen in order to determine whether Jews from metropolitan areas were more or less likely to intermarry than Jews from smaller communities. The indicators used in this study, the results of which are being published for the first time in this article, were the amount of inter-dating between Jews and non-Jews, and the frequency of "going steady" between Jews and non-Jews. "Going steady," a peculiarly American relationship, is often a prelude to marriage, although not so often at earlier ages, but indicates at any rate a willingness to enter a somewhat serious and, at least for the "going steady" period, exclusive dating relationship. It would seem reasonable to assume that the more inter-dating and the more "going steady" relationships we discover between Jews and

non-Jews, the more intermarriage there will be.

The Jewish students at Columbia and Barnard Colleges were divided into large-townners and small-townners, the line of division being a home-town population of 500,000. Naturally most of the large-townners came from the largest city with the greatest proportion of Jews, New York.

Considering only the freshmen (the small-townners of whom were least affected by living in a large city, since they had been there barely three months), it was found that among the small-townners 62 per cent had dated a Gentile within the past six months, while this was true for only 32 per cent of the large-townners for the same period. Almost twice as many people from small towns had dated non-Jews as people from large towns. A comparison of the two groups in terms of "going steady" is even more striking. Fully 21 per cent of the small-townners had "gone steady" with non-Jews, while this was the case with only 4 per cent of the large-townners.*

With so much more inter-dating and "going steady" with non-Jews among the small-townners it would seem reasonable to conclude that there is also a higher intermarriage rate in the smaller communities. This seems striking evidence that the intermarriage rate in the large metropolitan areas is lower than it is in the smaller communities; by exactly how much, we cannot of course say. However, these figures suggest that the 10 per cent figure for smaller communities is higher than we will find in the big cities where the great majority of Jews live, and the total national figure must consequently be smaller.

THESE figures present an unusual situation to the sociologist. If they are true the

*The differences between the small-townners and the large-townners decrease with each year of additional education, but the direction is persistent. This decrease in difference between the two groups is accounted for by the fact that the more time the small-townners spend in a large metropolis, the more nearly their attitudes and behavior correspond to the large-town natives.

The sample of the study included 536 students, which is approximately 2/5 of the Jewish population of Columbia and Barnard Colleges. The return of nearly 600 questionnaires of 1200 sent out is an extremely high response. The distribution of large-townners to small-townners was 2 to 1. Any bias which may have entered the sample would not affect a comparison of the large-townners and small-townners.

American Jew defies all the sociologists' generalizations concerning the close relationship between acculturation, assimilation, and intermarriage. As against the fear and consternation of many Jewish leaders at American Jewish intermarriage, the sociologist must be amazed at the low rate of intermarriage in the face of an otherwise high degree of assimilation (in the sense of being integrated into American life).

For the American Jew is a highly assimilated individual in almost every respect except that of intermarriage. He dresses, talks, acts, and thinks like most other Americans in analagous social positions. His attitudes are the same, as are his values, and, apart from the label Jew, we have a difficult time distinguishing him from most other Americans. The American Jew is hardly more "ethnic" in his mores than the American Quaker, the Irish American, or the American Roman Catholic. Certainly there are differences (for the most part unstudied), but the similarities far outweigh them.

Yet this high degree of assimilation notwithstanding, the American Jew continues to marry other Jews. And through this endogamy—marriage within his own group—he is able to maintain the identity of his proportionally very small group.

Romanzo Adams, who until his death in 1942 was a leader in the field of the sociology of intermarriage, felt that if intermarriage between two groups were to be effectively prohibited, the types of social contact that lead to intermarriage must also be prohibited. He went on to point out that this kind of prohibition gives rise to a whole code of social relations which, in the case of Jews and Gentiles, would require separate restaurants, hotels, colleges, clubs, schools, as well as separation in the remainder of the vast areas of social relations. But, as we all know, this is simply not the case—and American Jews continue to intermarry.

On the other hand, the evidence from other highly acculturated Jewish communities supports the sociologists' reasonable enough supposition that the lesser forms of assimilation must lead in a large number of cases to that final index of assimilation, intermarriage.

In the countries of Western Europe (for many of which we have government statistics) there were extremely high ratios of intermarriage before the war. In the cities, the assimilation of the Jew was most pronounced, and the

rate of intermarriage for these cities was in accordance with the degree of assimilation. The following figures from Ruppin suggest how extensive intermarriage was among the relatively assimilated Jews of Central and Western Europe.

Intermarriage rate (per cent of intermarriages of all marriages involving Jews)

Vienna	1932	25
Budapest	1929	28
Amsterdam	1934	28
Prague	1933	45
Berlin	1933	45
Copenhagen	1900-1905	48
Trieste	1927	71

WHAT then are the prospects for the future of intermarriage in America? Will American Jews maintain their unique pattern of high acculturation and low intermarriage, or, like the West European Jews before them, develop a high intermarriage rate? Unfortunately, our few statistics can tell us almost nothing about such a question.

In order to tell whether we have a relatively stable relationship here between assimilation and intermarriage, or whether we may expect a sharp rise in the future, we would need to have information on intermarriage rates year by year, city by city.* If, with this information, we observed no trend over the past twenty or thirty years toward increased intermarriage, we could say with some assurance that we are dealing with a stable situation.

However, our statistics give only an over-all picture of intermarriage as of one particular date. It may well be that in a city with a rate of 5 per cent, most of the intermarriages which make up this 5 per cent took place in the last five or ten years. In this case, if we looked at the intermarriage rate for only those recent years, the percentage of intermarriages would be much higher. Or it may be that in future years, we will look back on the present high degree of assimilation as almost-due notes to be cashed shortly for intermarriage greenbacks.

Because we lack the scientific evidence needed to make a justifiable prediction, we

*The two indications of trends we have are for New Haven and Des Moines. In New Haven there has been little change since 1930. In Des Moines the rate jumped from 4 per cent in 1937 to 8 per cent in 1950. But it would be foolhardy to make any more inclusive generalizations from only two observations.

might do well to look more closely at the study of Jewish college students referred to above.

This study measured the attitudes of a group of Jewish youth toward intermarriage by a method based on the use of many questions (33 in this case) and the computing for each individual of a score on a scale of favorableness and unfavorableness toward intermarriage. Fully 35 per cent of the students express a favorable attitude toward intermarriage; 43 per cent express a neutral attitude; only 22 per cent express an attitude in opposition to intermarriage. It is hard to evaluate these figures in isolation. However, it is revealing that as the students grow older and receive more education their attitude toward intermarriage becomes more favorable. While among the freshmen and the sixteen- and seventeen-year olds, 29 per cent express a favorable attitude toward intermarriage, this figure rises until, among the seniors and those twenty-one years old and over, 46 per cent express a favorable attitude. Correspondingly those who express an attitude in opposition to intermarriage decreases from 26 per cent among the freshmen to 12 per cent among the seniors.

Of course, the expression of a favorable attitude toward intermarriage does not mean that an individual will actually intermarry.

Parental objection in particular, we find, is cited by many of those favorable to intermarriage as a powerful obstacle. Thus one finds among those rated as favoring intermarriage (that is, seeing no good reason against it) many comments like: "I have no opposition to intermarriage for myself or anyone else, but my parents object violently to any mention of it. That is the only thing that would discourage me from entering into it." Or: "I could not intermarry while my parents or close relatives are alive. However, I see nothing wrong in intermarriage. . . ." (The same parental deterrent would presumably operate on the non-Jewish partner.)

Yet, as we have already indicated, we do not have here a situation where opinion is quite divorced from action. Forty-one per cent of the students in the study had dated a Gentile within the past six months; 9 per cent had "gone steady" with a Gentile. (If all those who "went steady" with non-Jews actually married a non-Jew, the intermarriage rate would be 18 per cent.)

The boys show a tendency to inter-date and to "go steady" with Gentiles more as they be-

come older and receive more education. The percentage who have inter-dated within the six months preceding the collection of the information jumps from 34 per cent among the freshmen to 56 per cent among the seniors. With the girls this is not so. They show no signs of an increase in either inter-dating or "going steady" with Gentiles as they climb the educational and chronological ladder. This is as we might have expected since almost all reports on Jewish intermarriage show Jewish men intermarrying more than Jewish women.

What can we conclude from this study? Although it gives evidence of a high degree of assimilation of the young Jew into American life in terms of thinking and social relations (84 per cent of the students had at least one close Gentile friend), the fact that only 9 per cent have entered a serious relationship with a non-Jew suggests that the precarious balance between assimilation and intermarriage seems to be maintaining itself or is only slightly bending. This is all the more true when we realize that the full force of community sanctions and parental objections is not felt at the "going steady" stage of a relationship or in the college atmosphere. However, the on-the-whole favorable or neutral attitude toward intermarriage suggests that the actual brakes on intermarriage stem from community disapproval and parental objection, rather than from the individual's convictions.*

THIS study of Jewish youth raises one last problem. It is the problem of being led to the waters but forbidden to drink. We have encouraged the cultural and social contacts which lead to intermarriage while condemning the intermarriage itself. It is ironical indeed that the very programs so favored by the Jewish group to reduce prejudice and anti-Semitism also have the latent function of increasing the temptation of intermarriage. The same personal associations and social contacts that show both the Jew and the Gentile that the Jew is no different from other men tend to encourage the contacts that lead to intermarriage. Campaigns to abolish religious restrictions in fraternities and sororities; to abolish college quota systems

*It is interesting that almost half (45 per cent) of the students felt they were "non-participating Jews"; 28 per cent classed themselves as "Conservative Jews"; 19 per cent felt they were "Reform Jews"; and 8 per cent felt they were "Orthodox Jews."

(instead of setting up Jewish colleges); pressures to eradicate gentlemen's agreements on real estate covenants, country club memberships, and resort restrictions; interfaith cultural and social activities—all have the beneficial result of helping the Jew and the Gentile understand each other, of enabling them to work together for common causes; but these same programs also result in smoothing the road that leads to intermarriage and the loss of the identity of the Jewish people by increasing the social and cultural contacts that lead to intermarriage.

I am not for a moment suggesting that these programs be discontinued or reversed. My purpose is only to show the other side of the coin, the problems that accompany present gains.

The full force of the problem of living in and associating with a Gentile world without being absorbed by it is faced by no group so directly as by unmarried Jewish young men and women. The psychological toll which this problem exacts from the minds and hearts of these young people should not be underestimated. For, on the one hand, they feel the compelling American urge to accept all people on the basis of individual worth, and on the other, they must face the possibility of carrying this doctrine to the extreme of intermarriage and thus face the accusing eye either of their own conscience or of the community and their parents.

It is only natural that the young Jewish man or woman growing up in a liberal American and Jewish environment learns well the lesson of cultural variability, a major theme of modern social science. And it is a short step from cultural variability to cultural relativity. "Does it really matter whether men worship in church or chapel, synagogue or mosque, in Hindu shrine or Buddhist temple? Does it really matter, so long as they believe in a divine purpose and in the brotherhood of man," declares James Warburg in a speech before an institute of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

On the abstract level there may be no con-

tradiction between a belief in this liberal ideology and the belief in the necessity of Jewish endogamy, inmarriage. Cultural variation, we may say, doesn't mean that each culture doesn't have its own unique value and contribution to make. It doesn't mean that the individual is free to change his culture at will. Choosing our friends and associates on the basis of individual characteristics doesn't mean that cultural background has no influence on individual characteristics, nor does it mean that we should choose our husbands and wives with complete disregard of cultural and religious background.

But this is all on the abstract level.

Proceeding from the abstract to concrete situations, there is a certain amount of inevitable conflict solved with sometimes more, sometimes less, difficulty. It is the conflict that is rehearsed nightly at one Jewish dinner table or another, the problem of whether Dave may ask the girl next door, a Gentile girl, to the prom; the problem of whether Joan may accept a date from the captain of the football team, who is not Jewish; or the problem, as father says, "How long is this going to go on?"—meaning his son's or daughter's continued dating of a non-Jew; or the problem of whether to "run around" in an all-Jewish crowd or a mixed crowd; or the problem of whether to move into the largely Jewish dorm or the one where the Jews are fewer and living mostly with Christian roommates; or the problem of whether to date Sally again when you begin to become a little more than usually attracted to her. The individual situations are endless. In a very real sense this conflict strikes at the heart of the problem of Jewish life in America, the problem of being integrated without being absorbed.

It is a problem for which there are no blanket answers. Each individual case must find its own best solution. But the first step in the solution of any individual case must be an awareness by both the Jewish and Gentile communities of the problem's outline.